

# Ask A Biologist

by Jesse Garcia

## Question:

I've hunted all of the upland game birds listed in the Hunting Regulations for Resident and Migratory Upland Game Birds except for ptarmigan. What is a ptarmigan and where can I find one?

## Answer:

Ptarmigan are heavy-bodied, gallinaceous (chicken-like) land birds and members of the bird order Galliformes. There are three species native to North America: rock ptarmigan, white-tailed ptarmigan, and willow ptarmigan. There are five known subspecies of white-tailed ptarmigan. The historical range of the white-tailed ptarmigan is from central Alaska through the Yukon Territory and British Columbia, and into the Cascade Mountain Range of north central Washington; and the Rocky Mountain Range from eastern British Columbia and Alberta south through Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and into New Mexico. However, ptarmigan were not found in similar habitats and climatic conditions in the Cascade and Sierra Nevada Mountain Ranges. This prompted both California and Oregon to make experimental releases of this species.

The ptarmigan is a small pigeon-sized bird, 12-13 1/2 inches long and weighing approximately three-fourths of a pound for males and one-half pound for females. Ptarmigan differ from grouse in that their feet are feathered to the tips of their toes and their upper tail coverts (feathers covering the bases of the quills of the tail) extend to the tips of their tails. Adult males in summer plumage

are mottled with black, buff and white dorsally (above), with buff tones predominating the lower back, rump, and upper tail coverts. The under parts are mostly white. Females are similar in plumage but have heavily spotted and more yellowish colored under parts. In the fall both sexes are mostly pale cinnamon-rufous above, with fine spotting of brownish black on the back and with a lighter head and neck. In the winter both sexes are pure white except for a black bill, eyes, and claws. This bird is extremely difficult to see against a lichen-covered rocky background and is therefore overlooked unless forced to move or fly. It is also equally difficult to see against a snowy background in its winter plumage.

The southern white-tailed ptarmigan (*Lagopus leucurus altipetens*) was first introduced by the DFG in 1971 and 1972 into alpine habitats (above timberline) in the Sierra Nevada at Mono Pass, Mono County. The birds were acquired through a trade agreement with the Colorado Division of Wildlife. By 1987 the ptarmigan had expanded its range to a 30 mile



White-tailed ptarmigan. Photo by Jesse Garcia.



Jesse Garcia has been a wildlife biologist with the DFG for 24 years. During his career he has worked on burro deer, upland game birds, furbearers and nongame mammals. Although pictured above with a wild turkey, he has hunted ptarmigan twice, enjoying a 100 percent success rate.

section along the crest of the Sierra Nevada from Parker Pass on the south to Matterhorn Peak on the north. Two years later, continuing their range expansion, white-tailed ptarmigan occupied upper portions of the Sierra Nevada from Carson Pass in Alpine County south to Bishop Pass, mostly above the 10,000 feet elevation. With this success, in 1989 the DFG instituted a permit-controlled hunting season for two years. Due to a light hunter turnout, permits were no longer required in 1991 for this unique hunting opportunity associated with high elevation and spectacular vistas.

Finally, most of the land where ptarmigan are found in California is public land owned and administered by the U. S. Forest Service or National Park Service. Please be aware that Forest Service land in these areas is generally open to hunting (with some exceptions) but national parks are closed to hunting. Always check with the local federal authorities for use regulations before embarking on your hunting trip.